
THE HISTORIANS

*A Tribute to Franco Borlandi**

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Paris

To deliver a tribute to the memory of Franco Borlandi here in the city which he loved and in the Faculty in which he chose to pass his working life is for me a great honour, a source of great joy, and also a heavy responsibility. All those who knew and loved him, all those who followed closely the train of his alert mind, will appreciate how difficult, if not impossible, is the task of describing his personality. A word — present — is sufficient to evoke it, and he is at once amongst us again. But to understand that personality is another matter altogether.

Indeed, what I hope for is to achieve such an understanding, to retrieve not simply the details of his outstandingly successful career, but more directly his very self and spirit, which was even more brilliant and exceptional. Almost, that is, as if he had become, or could have become, for a moment, now that he has left us, a historical subject which in its own right becomes the focus of considered, and meticulous research, determined to come to grips with its subject matter. It is such an exercise that I propose.

But first let me stress again that, faced with such a subject, it is not easy for the historian to pick up the thread of his argument. There are many reasons for this. First of all, the present state of our knowledge prevents us shedding much light on the childhood and youth of our subject. Franco Borlandi never wrote his memoirs and only rarely referred to his past, as if

* This is the text of the memorial address delivered by Fernand Braudel in the *Aula Magna* of the University of Genoa where F. Borlandi held his chair and of which he was also *Rettore*. F. Borlandi participated in the foundation of this journal and followed its early progress with great interest.

he was unaware of it, as if it had no importance for him, or as if — as I am virtually convinced — he believed in the present and *above all* in what he saw as the future. The delight in living always took pride of place for him over the delights of memory. He once mentioned to me that as a young historian he had spent some time in Vienna, but he never referred to this again. One should perhaps add that amongst his other gifts some kind fairy had also taken from him any passion for writing letters, or even for replying to those addressed to him, even in the case of telegrams sent in despair. Unfortunately, this presents a major set-back to us in our attempts to rejoin him, for he was an excellent letter-writer. The letter dated 23rd February 1974 which has been published by Professor Roberto Lucifredi is in our opinion one of the most important documents for anyone who wishes to understand Franco Borlandi and appreciate his tact, his intelligence, his subtlety, his ability to give critical stricture where merited in a benign and witty manner.

So I have no anecdotes to tell about his life. There are only occasional glimpses — Franco Borlandi as a child at Pavia who looked for pieces of Roman pottery in the sands of the Ticino. We have the opening of the film, but no sequel. Again we have a clear image of him as a partisan with a flowing red beard, almost hidden behind it, around 1944. But once again the film is broken. In the same way, most of you are (I am sure) familiar with the picture in 1945. Franco Borlandi was prefect of Pavia, when the partisans came in with a German suitcase stuffed with bank-notes, which were deemed to be booty of war. But the prefect-historian summoned a notary, instructed him to draw up an inventory of the bank-notes and then deposit them all, inventory as well, in the Bank of Italy. Again a splendid glimpse, but again the film is interrupted. In short, there are no documents from which to study his career — he does not reveal himself, there is simply nothing to be seen.

He did of course have a splendidly successful scholarly and University career. We must consider his tutors and the influence which they did, or did not, have on this exceptional student. But Franco Borlandi's case was exceptional in that he established himself as though he had rushed through his years of apprenticeship at a glance, while losing nothing in doing so. Although in little else, save intelligence, he resembled Lucien Febvre in this respect, and both shared the burdensome advantage of reaching their intellectual perfection and maturity very quickly. He was only 24 when he published his thesis on the problem of communications in the XVIIIth century and their contribution to the Risorgimento (*Il problema delle comunicazioni nel secolo XVIII nei suoi rapporti col Risorgimento*, 1932). As I shall demonstrate in a moment, he was already fully developed even in this his first book, and for me his whole scholarly *persona* shines from these pages, in just the same way that I see Titian fully formed and complete in the very earliest of the pictures which have survived to the present, *St.*

Peter Enthroned Adored by Alexander VI and Jacopo Pesaro, which was painted in 1502 and now hangs in the Antwerp Museum. In the case of Franco Borlandi even the most ambitious comparisons are fully justified, because he too was obliged from the very start of his career to carry this precious intellectual perfection. I will come back again to this same point, because it is the essence of what I have to say about him. It is also the major source of difficulty for the historian who attempts to recapture his personality and intelligence. He moved toward this state of understanding and knowledge through a series of stages which are best understood if we follow their sequence. He had a remarkable intelligence, undoubtedly one of the finest I have ever encountered, which emerged fully fledged in his brilliant early career and which I must now with great pleasure attempt to explore. His mind was complex and multi-faceted. It is good to hear people refer to Franco Borlandi's straightforwardness, which was imposing. This was the social aspect which he presented, but in reality his mind was like a fan which when opened revealed a riot of colours. A score, even a hundred, different ways of living, writing and thinking were open to him, but although he experienced them all, he only chose to follow a few — the prefect of Pavia, the diplomat at Brussels and Paris, director of Scientific Research at Rome, the recipient of the entire range of University honours. But he could just as easily have become an art historian as an economic historian, or have written poems or songs, have been a painter, an architect, a statesman, as have written on the fustian industry in Northern Italy in the late Middle Ages. He was always aware of the variety of skills which he carried with him, but for him the choice was history, and this is what he became attached to, this it was that drew him back to Genoa, rather than listen longer to the siren songs which sang within and for himself alone.

Between 1945 and 1974 Franco Borlandi lived the most active years of his career in the country which he loved but which was undergoing a very particular experience. This was of great importance both to him personally and to his work. The peculiarities of the Italian situation help us understand the man and set him in a context. In 1945 the country was broken and grief-stricken, and yet although by the early '70s she had succeeded in healing her wounds and restoring the foundations of her material structure and had even progressed in all sectors of economic life, Italy remained an uneasy country. Above this material in Italy, however, a new cultural superstructure had been created like an envelope, which was one of the most dazzling in Europe. Think of the painters, film-directors, and the novelists — as one Frenchman put it, it is the century of Dino Buzzati. Italians are inclined to reply that the brilliance is now ended, that the great literary revival is dead, but can this be true? If so, then so much the worse

for Europe, for in my opinion there is nothing, no matter where one looks, to replace it. Anyway, this was the Italy in which Franco Borlandi lived, and the humanities and social sciences, with history far from least amongst them, played their part in this cultural revival. As far as history is concerned, the discipline was dominated in 1945 by four great masters — Gino Luzzatto at Venice, Armando Saporì at Florence, Delio Cantimori at Pisa and Federico Chabod at Rome, before he moved to the Croce Institute in Naples. These were great masters indeed, men of integrity and craftsmen of the highest order. I knew them all and knew them well, and still hold them and their memories in the deepest affection. Gino Luzzatto was the Doge of Venice, a doge who would not have wished to rule except over the *Archivio dei Frari*. Armando Saporì was the last of the great late medieval merchants, the period which in his view led directly into the Renaissance. Delio Cantimori, on the other hand, sought out the heretics of the XVIth century in order to understand them. For Federico Chabod neither Machiavelli, nor Botero nor Milan, Rome or Naples which he felt to be so different from himself were enough until he went out to rediscover in the sad figure of Charles V the concept of the Emperor, which for him became a way of rediscovering not only Europe as a whole but also the whole world.

Franco Borlandi can without difficulty be compared with these great historians. Gino Luzzatto was attached to Venice, Franco Borlandi to Genoa. He always went back there. But, as you are aware, Genoa is a sacred monster, a historical abyss, a world unto itself. It is the most curious and enigmatic city in the world, in the front line of the destiny of events. Roberto Lopez, who was also fascinated by the past of the city, used to say that it was the only city in the world where inertia was unknown and where bodies ceased to have weight when it was time for action and progress. One evening, some ten or fifteen years ago after a day of torrential rain, I addresses a gathering in, I believe, this very Faculty, on the subject of Latin America, with Franco Borlandi in the chair. I spoke enthusiastically, for I lived there for some time. The audience knew the continent as well, if not better, than me and rose from their seats one by one and leaned half standing against the benches behind them; at the end of the paper they precipitated themselves forward and surrounded us. Franco Borlandi relished the fact that Genoa was a city in which it was possible to be weightless, in which there was no heaviness at all. Venice was the same for Gino Luzzatto, and in this he and Franco Borlandi were a pair. Delio Cantimori pursued his heretics across the entire peninsula, but Borlandi found his at Pavia. One associated Armando Saporì with the great merchant account books, and similarly in 1936, at the age of 28, Franco Borlandi published *El libro di mercatanterie et usanze de' paesi*, a model accounting book from which merchants had learned to think, act and even write. A model is something which stands over and above the ordinary, it is a structure. Franco Borlandi and Armando Saporì in this way

formed a pair. Federico Chabod withdrew himself from Italy and discovered Charles V, whose ghost was to imprison him. Franco Borlandi when he was 34, in 1942, also wrote an essay on "The age of the great discoveries and the economic revolution in XVIth century Europe" (*L'età delle scoperte e la rivoluzione economica dell'Europa del sec. XVI*). Here he came to grips with a problem of universal proportion, with the economic and social realities of a Europe which was experiencing profound change. Also, in another context altogether, the song which he sang to make his daughters laugh was about Magellan — and he sang it for me twice. There is no mistake, and we can safely conclude that he resembled the master historians and was on their level. But the spirit which motivated him was quite different from theirs, and it was this which constituted both his originality and also led to his undeniable superiority.

Unless I am mistaken and I sincerely believe that I am right, Franco Borlandi's historical writings derive from a perfectly coherent conception. The model of his thought is like an open fan in movement. The fan is wide open, and without having formulated the concept Borlandi was an ardent adherent of a global approach to historical research which touched on every branch of life. His interests and knowledge ranged right across the horizon. If you re-read his books carefully, you will see that he had always been concerned to adopt this "total" approach toward social phenomena — "social" relates to "society" and hence to a global perspective. He studied the population of Corsica in 1942 to show the impact of numbers on social phenomena. In studying the Great Discoveries it was in order to show their influence on social change in Europe itself. Generally he did not always draw on the full range of the fan, nor did he always seek to reduce problems to purely social issues, as rivers making their ways to the sea. But it was the breadth and totality of his horizons which sustained his research and which was inherent in all he did. It does not matter if you call this breadth a richness of culture and learning, because the result was still the same. I became aware of this some twenty years ago when he invited me to Pavia where he was still living, on the banks of the Ticino, at the time when his daughters Antonia and Roberta were still small girls. For an entire morning my wife and I lived, through him, the unforgettable town of Pavia. He showed himself to be an amazing guide, not because of his erudition alone — for that is accessible to all — but for his taste and his passion for art, qualities which cannot be created but which are either innate or else nonexistent. In Borlandi, they reached a peak of perfection. He had a real hunger for beauty. One of the finest days which we have experienced together, in short — I need only repeat the magic phrase *San Pietro in caelo aureo* for the charm of it to come flooding back to me with the sunlight.

So, history for him was men's lives in all their aspects. But this is not sufficient in itself if we are to grasp how his mind worked. We must not

overlook a continuous sense of movement, a habit of keeping on the move, of coming and going which was typical of him. He wanted to see for himself the entire historical field of operations, to cut across it as quickly as possible in order to take up a position right on the frontiers, at the point where the research activity was the most intense and from which the possibilities could best be reconnoitred. Our subject brings us all close to the margins of sorrow, but let me suggest an inadequate parallel which may make you smile: wasn't this Magellan's method? Not the Magellan of Franco Borlandi's song, but the man who circumnavigated America to find the Pacific and the South Seas?

Borlandi's purpose was to discover, to explain an issue, to make a step forward. It was discovery that interested him, not the colonization or occupation of the conquered terrain; that he left for others to worry about, but it was not his concern. The emphasis on discovery, on breaking down barred doors, on mapping out the islands, straits and landmarks, in short on resolving the problems which presented themselves, takes us to the heart of Franco Borlandi's mind and method. In his study of communications in Italy in the XVIIIth century written in 1932, he showed the way in which traffic which moved across the peninsula created a material unity even before the Risorgimento, so that political unification was preceded by the economic unity arising from a national market. No-one had said this before him, but thereafter he no longer concerned himself with the Risorgimento period in any systematic way. He had made a discovery, and that was enough. Then in 1936 came the *Libro di Mercantie...* which was a master-piece, a truly *structural* work: but once he had achieved his purpose, he turned to work on other problems and it was his daughter Antonia who took up the original theme some thirty years later. His study of the Corsican population in 1942 was also a pioneering project, for demographic history was not then, as now, a science or, as critics might say, a career in its own right. Borlandi carried out the work alone, and then moved away. This was the rule he established. In 1942 he published his work on the Great Discoveries, and, as you may well be thinking already, he discovered them for both the first and last time.

The same rule applied equally to his articles, which also serve to reveal his friendship for many historians of an older generation than his own, and to whose *festschrift* he often contributed. He wrote on the *guado* and *pastel* of the Middle Ages in honour of Gino Luzzatto; he dedicated his excellent article on the fustian industry in Northern Italy in the Middle Ages to Lucien Febvre; for Amintore Fanfani, to whom he was the most deeply attached, he presented a royal gift, the finest of all his articles: "The Origins of Marco Polo's Book..." (*Alle Origini del Libro di Marco Polo...*). In my passage I have already borrowed much from Professor Roberto Lucifredi's excellent *Ricordo di Franco Borlandi*, with whom I fully agree that this article on Marco Polo is a real jewel — the jewel that crowns his entire writings. Let us enjoy the pleasure of pausing for a moment to consider these revealing and

sparkling pages. You will perhaps object that this is an example which does not well bear out the thesis which I have proposed, that it does not conform to the rule I have suggested. This is true only in appearance, however. It is true that Marco Polo has been buried under an immense pile of erudition, some good, some less good. Everything had been said on the subject, or at least everything seemed to have been said. But at the same time, Marco Polo was still one of the major happenings in world history, and the marvelous edition of his travels produced in 1928 by Luigi Foscolo Benedetto had the effect of raising new interest and new problems. These new interests and problems also caught Franco Borlandi's attention and appetite. Finding himself fresh in an over-worked field and on tracks pitted with ruts was to prove a major windfall. Forty deliberately densely argued pages in which one searches in vain for a single superfluous word were all he needed. His was not the style of the thriller or detective story, and although this is a genre which often appeals to historians, I doubt whether it was to Franco Borlandi's taste.

As much as anything his article is a mathematical proof. To be brief I must reverse the order in which he proceeded to his conclusion. Whatever had been said to the contrary, Marco Polo was a merchant. In 1296 he accompanied a Venetian expedition of 25 galleys which sailed for the East. At the time of this new expedition to Asia Marco Polo was already over forty. But in the same year the Venetian flotilla was overwhelmed by Genoese vessels off Lajazzo, in Little Armenia, and Marco was taken prisoner in the Orient, not at Curzola in 1298 as is often claimed. He had with him his papers, which as well as documents almost certainly included his "merchants' manual, which he may well have composed and written himself. It was this merchants' manual that Rustichello of Pisa would have drawn on in the Genoese prisons. Franco Borlandi recreated, explained and separated the manual from the text edited by *Milione*. But even if the main thesis is mistaken and I am myself convinced that it is not, this merchants' guide, which is similar in many ways to the Pegolotti book, allows us to speculate, and suggests among other things that the mercantile route between India and China followed to an almost incredible degree the rhythms and rules of the European economy. As far as such similarities, which appeal to those concerned with universal history, go, I know of no more intelligent insight than that contained in these few short pages.

There is no need for me to tell you that Franco Borlandi was not delayed long by this mighty encounter, and the Venetian only engaged him for a moment. The rule of his intellectual life was always: move as far away as possible, go beyond the frontiers, but never stay on in newly occupied territory — let others follow on and take up their positions there if they so desire. Once again he behaved according to rule. In this context I wish to mention one final example which will now become si-

gnificant. In 1957 Franco Borlandi visited Paris, and was working in the National Archives with two young historians who had accompanied him, Alberto Tenenti and Ruggiero Romano. He was not at that time fifty years old. He thumbed through the documents, then called over his companions, and called me as well — he had just come across a really exceptional document, which he read, pondered on, and told us about. We gave it back to him, and at once, without taking any notes, he began to leaf through the pages again. He was a man who often turned over the page.

To draw his portrait I would like to know more about his teaching to see how he responded to the need both to see and help others to escape from minor tasks; to rediscover and help others to see all over again. Many of his pupils were called to help him, and the territories which he invaded were then generously handed to them. I know that his pupils — and I greet those of them whom I know, Professor Cipolla, Professor Felloni and Professor Giorgio Doria — will continue his brilliant teaching and this devotion above all to the single quality of discovery. I know that they, like me, consider Franco Borlandi to have been the greatest Italian historian of his day. Let us then shout out aloud if need be: Franco Borlandi is alive and will live on. It is no less true that he and his "triangular" smile will live on in our hearts. Had he been listening to what I have been saying, he would, I am sure, have raised both his arms in the air and smiled.